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**Our Roots in the Mezze:
The Politics of Food and
Arab-American Women Poets**

“We only saw it from a distance [her Arabic heritage]”, Helen Hatab Samhan explains. “It was all very foreign to us”. It’s true that Helen’s extended family maintained close ties and that her mother continued to cook *Syrian* food. But that was it (Shakir 1997: 95).

It is not a surprise that the two pioneering anthologies of Arab-American literature make a reference to food in their titles – *Grape Leaves: A Century of Arab-American Poetry* edited by Gregory Orfalea and Sharif Elmusa and *Food for Our Grandmothers* edited by Joanna Kadi – for food has played a key role in the preservation and dissemination of Arab culture. Food is not only about biological nourishment and writing about food is not only about gastronomic history. Rather, food demonstrates the historical, cultural, social and political developments of any given group: “Food is life, and life can be studied and understood through food” (Counihan/Van Esterik 1997a: 1).

Critics from numerous disciplines have come to acknowledge culinary history and texts as an important gateway into cultural and social consciousness. The anthropologist Sidney Mintz said that “Food is such a powerful dimension of our consciousness as living things” (Sonnenfeld 1999: xv) that we must study it to better understand human behavior, and I would add cultural behavior. There is an important relationship between food and literature in all cultures. This relationship can be found in nonfiction or fiction works, from the Greek Middle Ages with Homer’s poems (*The Iliad*, pp. 457-476) and the Greek “symposium”, the Latin “convivium”, Arabic popular narratives and proverbs, all genres of Arabic literature, James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, novels by François Rabelais, Virginia Woolf, Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, Primo Levi, Italo Calvino, Marguerite Duras, Marguerite Yourcenar, Francis Hayes’s “Under the Tuscan Sun”, the poetry of Giacomo Leopardi to contemporary ethnic American literature. Culi-

nary studies and gastronomic histories are increasing and becoming more respected in the academic world. However, there is not much written about food, feminism and Arab-American women's literature. In this essay, I will demonstrate the different notions of food in Arab-American culture through the textual richness of Arab-American women's writings. The essay starts with a brief look at citations of food in various texts by Arabs or about the Arab world. It looks at the role food and eating have played in the Arab world, in order to understand the culture and better comprehend the role food has played in the formation of an Arab-American identity. The essay then focuses on Arab-American women writers and the representation and meanings of food in their works. They describe the way food is prepared and served in Arab-American homes, but also use food to convey historical incidents, make political, social and cultural statements, portray Arab-American life and experiences, express meanings and emotions, tell stories, and act as cultural agents and agents of resistance. For these women writers, food is an identity definer. The essay argues that food has been one of the most powerful cultural transmitters leading Arab-Americans to their roots, and through food they have preserved their roots. When observing Arab communities in the United States, Latin and South America, food is the leading cultural component, the one that has predominately survived.

1. The Politics of *Food Culture* and the Arab World

Lebanon is everywhere
in the house: in the kitchen
of steaming pots, leg of lamb
in the oven, plates of kousa,
hushwee rolled in cabbage,
dishes of olives, tomatoes, onions,
roasted chicken, and sweets [...] (Joseph 1988: 27).

Food culture and writings about food go back to the earliest civilizations and much can be learned from kitchens. Lynne L. Gelber exclaims that, "food was likely the cause of the rise and demise of most cultures" (Gelber 1989: 159). There are numerous texts concerning food – history books, poetry collections and folk literature, cook-books, geography books, and it is worth mentioning some of them to show the presence of food on the printed page in the Arab world, and

in books written about the Arab world throughout history. Samuel Kramer suggested that

the first civilization to invent an alphabet, Sumer, arose because of the need for fertile land on which to grow barley, the staple of the Sumerians' paste, bread, and beer. And these people provided the first writing on food, a Farmer's Almanac (Gelber 1989: 159).

There were two manuscripts from the Abbasid period that Maxime Rodinson studied in his "Recherches sur les documents arabes relatifs à la cuisine" (1949) and both were entitled *Kitab al-Tabikh*. The first one was

by Muhammad b. Hasan al-Baghdadi (d 1239; 1934), the second by Ibn Sayyar al-Warraq (10th century; 1987), and a later one (in several variant versions), *Kitab al-Wusla ila'l-Habib*, of uncertain authorship, but probably by a 13th century Ayyubid prince in Syria, [and these] form the extant canon of cookery literature for the medieval Eastern Muslim world (Zubaida/Tapper 1994a: 3-4).

Geer Jan Van Gelder's *Of Dishes and Discourse* looks at Arab-Islamic culinary culture and how it is depicted in Arabic literature. This study confirms the significant presence of food in literature. In the chapter entitled "Adab or the Text of Banquet", Geer Jan Van Gelder explores the representation of food in the works of al-Jahiz, al-Zamakhshari, al-Ibshihi, al-Tanukhi, among others. There are also writings about food in travel accounts of different periods, such as the writings of the explorer and scholar Richard Burton (1821-1890). Through Burton's chronicle of dining in Mecca (1855) we find out what Arabs ate, with what ingredients these dishes were prepared, and the dining manners of the Arabs. For example, we learn that it was not "customary, in these lands, to sit together after dinner – the evening prayer cuts short the séance [...]" (Burton 2000: 66). In Egypt,

The discovery at Saqqara, at the funeral well of the tomb of a Second Dynasty woman (c.3700 B.C.E.), of a number of plates bearing assorted foods has provided a valuable source of information on eating preferences and food preparation during that early period. [And again a] great deal of information can be derived from the menu of a dinner prepared for a Nineteenth Dynasty pharaoh and his extensive retinue during an official visit (Bresciani 1999: 38-39).

There were many ingredients then that are still found today in the Arab menu, for instance, meats, fishes, ordinary and oasis grapes, dates, chickpeas, lentils, broad beans, figs, honey, breads, cucumbers,

different oils and beverages such as “Syrian beer, Palestinian wine [...]” (Bresciani 1999: 39). Of course, these are the basics and are prepared differently in every region of the Arab world; nonetheless, these ingredients encompass an essential part of what is referred to presently as Arabic food. Through food we get information about the agricultural sector at different periods of time. We come to know more about the variety of products that existed and the openness in the region since many products were exported, such as the “Cyprus oil, from the country of the Hittites, *nekefeter* oil from Babylon, oils from Amor, Syria, and Naharina” (Bresciani 1999: 39). Many of the foods mentioned above are part of the Mediterranean diet, more specifically in the land of Canaan.¹ Today, we refer to that region as Syria-Palestine and the western Phoenician world. In addition to the foods mentioned above, some others include cereal, barley, wheat, eggplant from this part of the Mediterranean region, which are common in contemporary Arab cuisine. We can assume, given the Arabic tradition today, that gathering for meals was a ceremony. In any contemporary Arab household, food and eating is about coming together; holding on to the food of their ancestors is a spiritual act and culturally symbolic, it is a strong portrayal of family traditions. Arabs consider eating together as Plutarch described it to be: “We do not sit at table only to eat [...] but to eat together” (Montanari 1999a: 69). It is a ritual, an expression of the past, of history, of diverse mixing of cultures and togetherness. Arab immigrants consider that if their children and grandchildren eat Arabic food and like it, this confirms that they have embraced their roots and that they **belong** to that civilization and honor it. In a small society food “is understood to be the product of the labor of known

1 The land of Canaan is “[...] the geographical area that became Phoenicia at the beginning of the Iron Age, [which] was originally occupied by the Canaanites, a group of Semitic origin. During the third and second millennia B.C.E., it was divided into small city-states with close political and cultural links to the great powers of Syria, Mesopotamia, and Egypt.

In the twelfth century B.C.E., political equilibrium in the Near East was disturbed by a progressive deterioration in social and economic organization and the migratory flows of large numbers of groups known as the Peoples of the Sea. As a result, the land of Canaan broke up into a number of nation-states, including Phoenicia [...].

The Phoenician people occupied a narrow strip of territory between the sea and the Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon mountain ranges, where the land available for cultivation was limited but fertile” (Giammellaro 1999: 55).

individuals, the output of their blood, their sweat, their tears” (Meigs 1997: 104-105). For Arab-Americans, food is a symbol of their Arab origin, Arabic food is in their **blood**. But food is not only heritage: it is often also patriotism.

Food unravels numerous meanings. For example we can often distinguish which culture people are from – national and religious – by what foods they eat and their mannerisms and attitudes. Do they pray before they eat and so forth? What you do not eat can also say who you are, that is how Christians centuries ago knew who was Jewish, because they did not eat pork. Food demonstrates the cultural traits and behaviors of a group, for instance, the hospitality (giving and sharing) of Arab culture is expressed through their continuous offering of food. Food is a gift of God, according to Islam, and should be shared. Through eating we create bonds and a social solidarity by learning about others, by learning to understand and accept their differences as well as our own. In this line of thought it is interesting to look at ancient Semitic communities. Anna Meigs reminds us that according to Robertson Smith, a Scottish theologian, these communities

understood themselves to be mystical and physical unities, as sharing a common life, as participating in an intense communality with one another and with their deity. Food and eating he understands as one means by which that communality is established and enhanced (Meigs 1997: 104).

Food is not only a distinguishing element of any ethnic group or country and an agent for social alliances; food can also be a distinctive factor in the notion of otherness. Some groups have used food to show their superiority or cultural difference. The dietary composition of the Jews, for instance, was used as an indicator of their identity, their otherness, and functioned as a source of cultural solidarity (Montanari 1999b: 190). And “In relation to the Islamic world, the pig played an absolute symbolic role, representing Christian Europe in its entirety” (Montanari 1999b: 191). However, immigrants in the United States have mostly experienced **otherness** in a discriminatory way. By eating **other** foods they have been looked down upon, have been mocked. However, gastronomical distinctions have contributed to more awareness of a given culture and it is a powerful political, religious and cultural statement that must be made by all ethnic groups. Food also

can indicate social class, historical period, society, spiritual beliefs and eroticism (which has not really been explored in Arab-American literature). Naomi Shihab Nye's poem "Different Ways to Pray", shows the important role food plays in Arab culture and the difficulties of contemporary Palestinian life, and a spiritual moment transfigures. She writes:

Under the olive trees, they raised their arms – Hear us! We have pain on earth!
We have so much pain there is no place to store it! But the olives bobbed peacefully
in fragrant buckets of vinegar and thyme.
At night the men ate heartily, flat bread and white cheese,
and were happy in spite of the pain [...] (Nye 1995: 18).

Suheir Hammad does not exactly explore the erotic but uses "erotic language". In some of her poems, to describe oppression towards women, whether physical, mental, religious, cultural or political, she uses curse words, names private parts, uses food imagery and eating habits, which create intensely penetrating tension. She writes:

I must look spicy & exotic
cause he's wonderin if I sell
my curry pussy
or lend it free
& if i'm as finger lickin good
as the liver his mama used to
stew fry bake (Hammad 1996a).

Food and eating identify the psychological characteristics of a character or a people, of a situation or given place; and it is a personal expression reflecting one's understanding, attitude and emotion towards the self and the other. We nourish and discover each other through the food we prepare for each other. In Nye's poem "The Palestinians Have Given Up Parties", she shows the oppression Palestinians feel and live under by using images of food. She writes:

Once singing would rise
... [even if you were] [...] cooking something simple
for your family,
...mountains of rice
...[and] Sometimes you didn't even know.
You ate all that food without knowing.
...[that] bombs break everyone's
sentences in half.
...Ripping up roots (Nye 1998a: 57-59).

Food forms identities, regional and national; it is home for many Arab-American immigrants. Pauline Kaldas writes about food as home and how even her ethnicity is reflected in the color of Arabic food:

Homesick for the streets
[for] the smell of crisp fried falafel
and cumin spiced fava beans,
sweetshops
display their baklava and basboosa
glistening with syrup
browned like people who make them (Kaldas 2001).

When exiles or immigrants smell the spices used in Arabic cooking or eat Arabic food outside their country they immediately feel home, then often start reminiscing about their childhood, feeling nostalgic for their homeland and their past. Food also awakens in them desire and joy. Arab immigrants and those of Arab origins like Arab-American women writers grew up “tasting” their country of origin.

2. Eating Arab & American Food: The Formation of a New Identity and the Rise of Ethnic Foods in the United States

Her Brooklyn kitchen's in exile [...] (Williams 1993).

The variations between each generation of Arab American immigrants – what was preserved, what was lost and how new cultures and identities were formed – differs. And after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the revision of the U.S. immigration laws in 1965, there were changes in Arab immigration and hence in the Arab communities in the United States. Accompanying those transformations were re-constructions of food cultures. The “McDonaldization” of food culture in the U.S., as the French sociologist Claude Fischler says, is one change (Fischler 1999: 530). Adding to that change is the upsurge of “ethnic fast food” such as Tex Mex and food from newer immigrants – Middle Easterners, Asians, Caribbean, Latin American etc. – indicating the important transfigurations taking place in the dietary routine of Americans. Food has been a significant vehicle of cultural awareness and awareness of cultural diversity; and this represents a departure toward a more accepting, tolerant multicultural and pluralistic America. In fact, in the past “Americans have not been as tolerant of and curious about their neighbors as they have about their neighbors' foods” (Gabaccia 1998:

228). Thus, food has been and continues to be the least contested, most accepted element of cultural difference even if cultural barriers and misunderstandings remain. Eating the food of the **Other** is crossing cultural boundaries which is an important way to understand difference, acknowledge it, embrace it and make it part of your individual identity. Food creates social and economic alliances. This does not signify that people stop longing for what they have always eaten; in fact, psychologists say that the food people ate “as children forever defines familiarity and comfort” (Gabaccia 1998: 6). Rather, it simply suggests that they have agreed to culinary diversity, even though at **home** one regional or national cuisine is often predominant.

Donna R. Gabaccia believes that

What unites American eaters culturally is how we eat, not what we eat. As eaters, all Americans mingle the culinary traditions of many regions and cultures within ourselves. We are multi-ethnic eaters (Gabaccia 1998: 225-226).

But by agreeing to be multi-ethnic eaters, aren't Americans indirectly agreeing to become multi-ethnic? Gabaccia points out:

Hot dogs and Cracker Jacks, fried chicken and Fritos all emerged from specific cultural communities (German, southern, and Mexican) but lost their ethnic ties. Few people today think of hot dogs or Cracker Jacks as German, Fritos as Mexican-American, or Kentucky Fried Chicken as “soul food” (Gabaccia 1998: 225).

Thus she is emphasizing the point that these different foods **become** American food, but Americans do not become part of these ethnic groups. Although there is truth in that statement, it does not entirely hold up, and I don't think the ethnic tie has been completely lost. Even if it is at a subconscious level, I think that Americans, especially if their family originated from where that particular food came from – be it Mexico or an Arab country or German –, make cultural associations which make them feel somewhat close to or least feel familiar with that culture.

If we consider what theorists of American identity suggest, from Crèvecoeur to Arthur Schlesinger,

that immigrants and racial minorities should do the same [as the food culture did], [...] that Americans are best united as a people when they lose their ties and loyalties to particularistic regional and cultural communities (Gabaccia 1998: 226-227),

we will recognize the imperialistic traits of these suggestions. Why should ethnic groups lose their ancestral particularities? This process did not occur anyhow, for as we have seen, “American” culture did not eliminate all traces of its ethnicity and became uniquely “American”, instead, ethnic groups have hyphenated themselves to preserve their roots while still being American. Gabaccia insists that Tex-Mex has “a clear national identity that is American, not Mexican” (Gabaccia 1998: 227). She has underestimated ethnic culture. Tex-Mex is hyphenated like many Americans are, and even if it is not considered Mexican but an American regional cuisine, this Americanness is still associated with Mexican culture. The only reason it is considered more American than Mexican is because it is not authentic Mexican food, but an American version of Mexican food. In that light, it could be seen as uniquely American, nevertheless, many of the ingredients remain Mexican. I will go further and explore the more mystical economic and cultural viewpoint of Marcel Mauss in *The Gift* (first published in 1925):

To give something is to give a part of oneself [...]. In this system of ideas one gives away what is in reality a part of one’s nature and substance, while to receive something is to receive a part of someone’s spiritual essence (Mauss 1967: 10).

Mauss’ thought supports the integration and circulation of cultures and selves “within each other”, which would mean in this case that through hyphenated foods both sides are becoming part of each other. Tex-Mex or any other ethnic-American food would not become “solely” American, as Gabaccio suggests, but rather would become part of each other – the American part of the **Other**, the Other part of the **American**. Finally, Jean Anthelme Brillant-Savarin’s famous 1825 aphorism continues to confirm itself, “Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you who you are”. Americans as multicultural eaters are multi-ethnic.

Where is Arabic food in regard to the multi-ethnic American food scene? Its references vary and change, and are delivered as “Lebanese” or “Middle Eastern”, sometimes “Israeli” or even “Vegetarian” food. It is rare for it to be referred to as “Arabic food” probably because of the polemic surrounding the word Arab and probably because of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Suheir Hammad mirrors this point, adding that there is also a tendency in the U.S. to alter the original way the

food is cooked to fit America's norms, thus to some extent ridiculing Arabic culture. She writes:

[One] time I heard [...] white girls order falafel [...]. They wanted it extra crispy, as though it were some fried chicken or potato chips [...]. Almost choked when I heard them ask for "ghummus [...]". Wanted to tell them it was pronounced *hummus* [...]. When they were walking out, I heard them talking about how much they loved Israeli food and belly dance music oh-so-cute? (Hammad 1996b: 72).

Arabic food is not recognized as such, however it is part of popular American cuisine – hummus, tabbouli and pita bread are found in many cafes, restaurants and supermarkets (canned or put in plastic containers for mass consumption). Looking at the dynamics of consumerism and consumption we discover far more than simply consumer demand, it tells us much about America's societal and cultural trends, changes and metamorphoses.

Food demonstrates cultural subjugation, acceptance and appreciation, self and community development. It harvests new identities. On the other hand, food can also be taken as an indicator that immigrants resist full integration. But then again, they have negotiated by hyphenating, reinventing or Americanizing their food preparations (example: creating pita wraps/sandwiches with hummus to accommodate American fast food and/or sandwich culture). The rise of *nouvelle cuisine* and, later, new world cuisine is an interesting evolution to consider, for it demonstrates the rise of American culinary and social cosmopolitanism. First, *nouvelle cuisine* reinvented old traditional dishes, then "new world" *cuisine* used ingredients from different cultures when creating a dish, reflecting the merging of cultures taking place in American society.

American eating habits continue to shift, just as society's beliefs and morals change over time. These manifestations have been taking place since before modern consumerism. We eat initially to survive, which in turn has developed into a source of pleasure that increases with time and leads to a demand for novelty. Americans are increasingly curious and interested in food from their regional and national roots and foods from other ethnic groups, and their gustatory multiculturalism is increasing. Food is a cultural recipe for self-definition, as we will see in the following section.

3. The Mezze of Roots: Representation of Food in Arab-American Women Writers

A cousin sent me
a video cassette of my family –
Everyone was in the kitchen (Mattawa 1995).

Food has appeared in most Arab-American writings – in poems, novels, plays, essays, and book titles. And the use of food in the titles of many important books by Arab-Americans – *Tel Zaatar was The Hill of Thyme* by Fawaz Turki, *Grape Leaves*, *Food for Our Grandmothers* among others – indicates the primal place food has in Arab-American identity and culture. When looking at the construction of food and what it represents in the work of Arab women writers, the following associations with food occur: connection with politics, relatives, families, countries of origin, and the land, customs and traditions. Food is used to define Arab societies, people and the writers themselves at a more philosophical or affective level. It is often through food that these women writers experience Arabness and Arab culture, become Arab and pass this culture down to their children. Kadi describes in *Food for Our Grandmothers* how olives, bread, thyme, yogurt, grape leaves and mint recur in Arab-American experience, and presents these as emblems of Arab life. For example, when these writers use olives in their works it is often linked to olive trees, which represent Arabs' long connection to their land and culture (Kadi 1994a: 3). She says that most Arab and Arab-Americans believe, "We owe it to ourselves, our ancestors, and the ones who come after us to celebrate our wonderful culture, whether we find it in the *laban* we eat or the stories we read" (Kadi 1994b: 237).

In his book, *Great Literature of the Eastern World*, Ian P. McGreal refers to an important argument by the well-known philosopher, scholar and historian Ibn Khaldun (*1332 in Tunis, †1406 in Cairo). Khaldun suggests in *Muqaddimah (Introduction or Prolegomena)* that "Geography, climate, and food source decide both the human body (color, stamina, intellect) and character" (McGreal 1996: 523). The Arab character often develops inside Arab-American women writers as their mothers and grandmothers feed them Arabic food. The relationship between Arab-American women and food is an important source of roots, identity, strength and self-assertiveness,

which is ironic since food and its preparation has often been seen as taking freedom away from women. Arab-American women writers have represented being in the kitchen as liberating instead of being oppressive, as offering avenues of creativity and artisticness instead of being confining. They have used food rhetoric as a vehicle to liberate the myth from itself and to create a new space where the kitchen is a place of expression, personal and cultural, a place of self-development and enrichment. It is in the kitchen that Kadi learned about being a cultural worker. She writes, “I did not sit in that kitchen smelling warm milk and think to myself: My grandmother is engaged as a cultural worker. But that is what she was” (1994b: 232). This writer grew up understanding with some difficulty what culture meant, especially what Arab culture meant because in her home she experienced cultural displacement. The following passage demonstrates how Kadi’s race, class and ethnicity affected her relationship with food. She writes:

Although my family listened to Arab music, danced Arab folk dances, and ate Arab food, I did not perceive any of this as culture. Perhaps if we had not been so isolated from a larger Arab community things would have been different. But as it was, the people around us, and society generally, perceived our music and our food on good days as a series of weird, isolated, and exotic behaviors that for some reason my family engaged in. On bad days they perceived it as disgusting as well as weird (Kadi 1994b: 232).

Like so many other Arab-American writers, she later understood and stated:

It is only now [...] that I understand I grew up surrounded by Arab culture. It is only now that I understand what happened in my grandmother’s kitchen. It is only now that I perceive the connection between what I do as a cultural worker and what my grandmother did when she made laban (Kadi 1994b: 232).

It is only later on in D. H. Melhem’s life that she understood that her “grandmother [was] always working peeling potatoes/ [and her] mother also” (Melhem 1995: 18). Like Kadi, many of these women writers later defined themselves by way of what they ate in their childhood. The social and cultural diversity among Arab-American women writers – what Arab country they originate from and what part of the U.S. they were raised in – can be seen by the food they describe. In *Drops of this Story*, Suheir Hammad illustrates her multiplicity through the variety of food she ate growing up. She writes:

I tell you I was raised around the delicious stinks of the ghetto. Fried plantains and smoked refers, my mother's stuffed eggplants and the neighbor's pork ribs. Our apartment building was always swaying with smells of the East, the Caribbean, and the South (Hammad 1996b: 6).

Jocelyn M. Ajami,² also discovers and defines herself through food: "I thought of myself as Latin American until I was a teenager and realized that *hummus* and *caraotas con arroz* (black beans and rice) were not part of the same banquet" (Ajami 2000). Mohja Kahf uses food to describe herself, **she** is/becomes the recipe of an Arabic dish: "I am scented oil; I am spice, I am rice of every hue cooked with nuts, pine and pistachio".³ Hammad does the same in "may I take your order?" when she writes:

I'm the main dish
walkin down the street
my face a menu
...olive skin almond eyes bitter tongue (Hammad 1996a).

The poet in her poem "mama sweet baklava"⁴ not only describes and refers to an Arab woman using a type of food but demonstrates cultural succession through food while also conveying Palestinian lives of exile, fragmentation and suffering:

she is baklava
this woman called arab
her recipe old and passed
down through word of
hand creating and sustaining
one and a thousand chiffon
veils of depression and exile
dispossession and miles
of tears between her
and home
the home where...
... her recipe is
known and appreciated
the walnut almond house
...where she sits
back with strong black

2 Ajami is a painter, filmmaker and writer born in Caracas, Venezuela to Arab-Christian parents. She resides in Boston.

3 "From the Patios of the Alhambra", unpublished poem, sent by the author.

4 Published on <<http://www.cafearabica.com>>.

coffee and finally
tastes herself...

She “tastes herself”, finds herself and home in Arabic food. Hammad said during a reading at City University of New York (April 27, 2001)⁵ that when people ask her about baklava she says, metaphorically speaking, “it has to be Arabic, it is so complicated”.

Elmaz Abi-Nader describes her land of origin, Lebanon. She tells us of its richness and demonstrates the important place storytelling holds in Arab culture, particularly stories about food, for example, uses of fruits and its trees. She writes:

The tales my mother and father told me
are true: the apricots are as big
as oranges and as bright as the sun.
Grapes sag on the vine from the wealth of wine already inside of them.
The figs burst
as you walk through groves,
begging for you to hold on [...] (Abi-Nader 1999a: 18).

It was also when Abi-Nader’s *Sitti* (grandmother) was teaching her how to cook, “how to crease the spinach pies right down/ the middle” that she discovered much about her *Sitti*’s cultural ways and values, and the poet never ceased to “listen as [her *Sitti*] told [...] her stories” (Abi-Nader 1999b). She also never ceased to listen to the sounds of food in the *souqs* in Yemen. The poet uses food imagery to describe the place, “Pyramids of pots and oranges,/ alps of curry, sumac and cumin” (Abi-Nader 1999c). And Nye uses food to describe pain, uses food as a symbol Palestinians lean on and hold to. She writes:

[...] the way he carried
oranges and falafel
in his pockets
the way he was always
slightly mad (Nye 1994).

It is similar to the way Abi-Nader’s *Sitti* **holds** on to the food as she

Crawled
behind the lines of Turkish soldiers
flour and rice hanging in bags in the cave
of her arms pits (Abi-Nader 1999d).

5 Talk on “The Poetry of Arab Women” by Nathalie Handal followed by readings by Handal, Hammad and Melhem held at City University of New York (CUNY), April 27, 2001.

D. H. Melhem equally experienced culture, her mother, her grandmother and herself in the kitchen, as the three of them connect while making food. She writes, in this penetrating portrayal of Arabic culture, of three generations of Arab women and their relationship with food, how in the kitchen they made cultural statements as well as sent messages of resistance, persistence and determination:

It is warm in Grandma's kitchen [...] [a] kitchen... warmed all day by the cooking [...]. My mother, my grandmother sit at the white enamel kitchen table, kneading dough, shelling peas, measuring pine nuts into the chopped lamb and onions, soaking the crushed wheat for kibbeh filling dozens of meat pies, stuffing chicken and squash and green peppers and eggplant, rolling stuffed grape leaves and stuffed cabbage like cigars, making dumplings for yoghurt soup among cans of sesame oil and boiled butter, peeling scores of potatoes for baked lamb necks and shanks and roast chicken, boiling rice, browning rice and onions, adding rice and tomatoes to large pots of marrow-bone vegetable-soup, sitting and chatting [...]. I watch and listen, tasting dough and stuffing [...] [while absorbing] the strange names of relatives and friends I shall never meet, Beit this and Beit that, houses remote as the house of Atreus, incidents and characters recalled and savored as I anticipate the mention of meaningful names dropping from the flow of Arabic between them: aunts and uncles who live in the house, my mother's sisters and brothers. I bear witness to a daily translation of two women's lives into pots and pans (Melhem 1995: 17).

Michaela Raen expresses a longing for the past, for her ancestors and herself through food:

I miss my grandmother's hands
watching them,
as she washed the grape leaves
mixed the lamb with lemon juice [...]
Watching her hands
turn the pages of my her story (Raen 2001).

As we have seen, these women's grandmothers played an essential role in transmitting Arab culture, mostly in the kitchen through food and storytelling.

Dima Hilal writes in "ghaflah – the sin of forgetfulness" about the people of Lebanon, loss of self and perspective, cultural shame nourished by immigrant experiences of discrimination and feelings of inferiority, and acceptance of degradation by eating the modified version of their cultural dish. She writes:

we eat pasty hummous at eight dollars a plate
and tell each other
how much we miss our home (Hilal 2001).

The following poets communicate through their usage of food different traits and features of Arab culture. Melhem says:

sunday at grandma's: politics and dishes
the men playing cards (Melhem 1995: 31).

Lorene Zarou-Zouzounis writes:

filling the air with aroma
of a culture of olive,
almond and fig groves (Zarou-Zouzounis 2001).

Nadia Hazboun Reimer describes in "The Middle East".

no, it is not only the date clusters
in the palm trees
but also the oil, the phosphate. The potassium, the olives, the citrus,
the salt,
the milk and honey,
and the manna that falls from heaven (Hazboun Reimer 2001).

And Lisa Suhair Majaj does the same when she describes her visit to the West Bank in late March 1997, reconfirming how life in the Arab world revolves around food. She writes, "The waiter brings *hummus*, *mtabal*; many kinds of salads. The waiter brings trays of kebab and kefta, baskets of stone-baked bread, platters of oranges and bananas".⁶ Majaj delivers the goods of the Arab world that often appear and reappear in the writings of these poets,

travelers eastward
brought cuttings, sprigs
in the luggage: olive
and plum, bitter orange
and sweet black grapes (Majaj 1996a).⁷

A comparable scene appears in S.V. Atalla's poem "Visiting the West Bank":

⁶ "The Day", unpublished poem, sent by the author.

⁷ Also published in *International Quarterly* (1994) and *Mr. Cognito* (1991). Translated into Arabic and published in the Arabic version of Salma Khadra Jayyusi's *Anthology of Modern Palestinian Literature*.

Every time we arrive this unloading begins. From freezer and pantry the delicacies of each season: vine leaves wrapped in April, winter's marmalade, quince jelly; zaatar dried in June (Atalla 2001).

In the following passage, Hammad conveys the dilemmas of doubleness and the ways she has negotiated her identity through food:

It lives on the back of my tongue. Where the taste of falafel and hummus mingles with the bite of plantain and curry. Why couldn't we just eat pancakes and bacon like everybody else? We had to have olives at every meal and pita bread with everything. I know now that I always loved that food. It's just hard to be different all the time. When it became cool to eat hummus, falafel, tabouleh, and pita with everything, it was too late. I had already wasted years of trying to trade my *labeneh* sandwiches for peanut butter and jelly, which I didn't even like. I know now that I was just another immigrant kid, trying to fit in (Hammad 1996b: 51-52).

Nye demonstrates her dualness by telling her readers what she ate at home when she was young and what was eaten around her. The poet in the following passage also draws a picture of most Arab homes, filled with stories and imagination:

Our Palestinian father was a wonderful storyteller. Every night my brother and I drifted off to sleep wrapped in the mystery of distant neighbors, villages, ancient stone streets, donkeys, and olive trees. Our house by day was fragrant with cardamom spice and coffee, pine nuts sizzled in olive oil, and delicious cabbage rolls. My girlfriend brought iced cupcakes to girl Scouts for treats, but I brought dates, apricots, and almonds (Nye 1998b: vii).

In Mohja Kahf's poem "The Roc", she speaks about immigrating and entering another culture through its food market and new food habits. She writes:

Here's my mom and dad leaving...Damascus
 ...the daily boiling and cooling of fresh milk.
 ...Here they are crossing the world,
 ...They know nothing
 about America: how to grocery
 shop
 ...how the milk comes, thin glass bottles
 ...mom [laughs] at the strange loaf of bread
 ...dad holding up the new world coffee (Kahf 2001).

Beverages also appear in the work of these women authors, especially references made to coffee: the different meanings it projects in Arab culture and its strong association with Arab culture. To offer a cup of coffee in the Arab world is very common and is a gesture of hospi-

talities and welcome. The scholar Ralph S. Hattox tells us that, "Coffee came into general use in the lands of Islam sometime in the mid-fifteenth century" (Hattox 1988: 11). Also,

Coffee, or at least the consumption of the fruit of the plant [...] is usually traced to Ethiopia. It is there that those who are traditionally credited with introducing it into general use in the Islamic world are said to have first seen it (Hattox 1988: 13).

About coffee, childhood and culture, Hammad writes:

Stirred into the heavy Arabic coffee and Café Bustelo of my childhood.
Don't like coffee too tough. When I was little, Arab women would tell me that young girls who drank coffee would grow heavy mustaches. There were other warnings from these frustrated women who found themselves in loveless marriages (Hammad 1996b: 80).

Nye writes an entire poem on coffee entitled "Arabic Coffee" emphasizing the importance of Arabic coffee in an Arab household. The poem describes the way Arabic coffee is made and served, and the storytelling, reminiscing and longing that accompanies drinking coffee. She writes:

It was never too strong for us: make it blacker, Papa,
thick in the bottom, tell again how the years will gather
in small white cups.

Serving coffee, the expression of Arab hospitality and continuity,

was an offering to all [his guests]
stay, be seated, follow the talk
wherever it goes. The coffee was
the center of the flower.
...a motion of faith (Nye 1995: 130).

Majaj combines coffee and food when illustrating "Jerusalem":

In the Old City, grocers scoop rice and wheat
from huge sacks, pour grain into deep brass scales
measure anise and cardamom and thyme.
When sun slips into the pans it's swept up
without charge, the way you don't pay for the fragrance
of coffee, zaatar's bright swirl of sumac.

The poem continues, expressing grief and melancholy with food rhetoric,

Not like the mass of sorrow
weighing the air beneath the odor of cumin, that tips the scales in every
reckoning (Majaj 1996b).⁸

Arab-American women writers have also used food to address famine, as well as alimentary problems of contemporary society such as bulimia, anorexia, food obsession and over-eating. In “When Fat Women Fear Famine”, Brenda Moosy demonstrates some of the characteristics mentioned above. She writes:

When women fear famine,
not even their children are safe.
...These women are vigilant
against the threat of wanting.
They are full-fleshed warriors
waging war against the enemy
they cannot see
...hear
...They know the pain of the gnawing heart,
the ache of the hollow bone (Moosy 1997: 10-11).

As we have seen, food has many meanings. It can be a symbolic representation of someone, of a culture or an emotion, or it might be used to express, relay a message or set the stage for a love scene or any event. But beyond that we all have an intimate relationship with food that never ends. Food is its own language and encompasses our entirety – our roots, our old and new identity and culture, our bodies and minds, our loves and desires, ourselves.

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